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ABSTRACT

Problems posed by varying interpretations of the terms "native speaker" and "native language" in relation to discrimination in hiring foreign language teachers are discussed. The central question is whether there is an educational basis for giving hiring preference to a native speaker. One argument stresses that it is preferable for students to be exposed to the genuine accent of native speakers. Another argument stresses that students need professors for role models--professors who, like the student, started out without ability in their target language. The author contends that any policy of preference for native speakers is demeaning and destructive to the essence of the language teaching profession. An argument could be made for giving preference to American-born over foreign-born language instructors in that the former may have greater empathy with the problems faced by American students. However, there are subtleties of language so difficult to acquire and employ that native speakers offer undeniable advantages to the student learning their language. A self-monitoring policy of balance between foreign native and American-born faculty members in language departments should be established with the understanding that in filling a vacancy the only justified criteria are standards of excellence. (JK)

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The "Native Speaker" Issue: Problem or Pretext?

At the MLA meeting in Houston in December of 1980, the ADFL and the MLA Commission on the Status of Women in the Profession jointly sponsored a session on Issues of Discrimination in Foreign Language Departments. Dr. Diane L. S. Peters, who holds a Ph.D. in German from Columbia University as well as a law degree and who is currently an attorney in Detroit, spoke on "'Native Fluency' as a Form of Discrimination: Results of a Fact-Finding Study." Dr. Phyllis Z. Boring, Professor of Spanish at Rutgers University, where she chairs the Department of Spanish and Portuguese and where she formerly held the positions of Associate Dean and Equal Employment Opportunities Officer, discussed the topic of "Native Speakers, Ethnic Speakers, and Nonnatives: Is There a Pattern of Bias in the Profession?" The present essay is an extension of my own remarks at that session, presanted under the same title.

As the only man and the only native speaker on the panel, I attempted to approach the issue from a somewhat different perspective--although not that of a foreign-born male chauvinist. Diane Peters dealt with the problem from a legal point of view, basing her data on a questionnaire she had sent to major foreign-language departments, whereas Phyllis Boring's approach was somewhat more anecdotal, with a large number of illustrative examples. Both found a prevailing pattern of discrimination directed primarily against women.

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My own presentation addresses some of the underlying questions of educational philosophy, a topic which unfortunately many of us in the profession (and not only in the language departments) tend to avoid like the plague, not only because it is painful to contemplate and makes us feel slightly uncomfortable, but also ~~because~~ because it is a concept most slippery and elusive to the grasp, on which no two people can agree. Those of us who venture onto such dangerous grounds tend to labor under a severe medical handicap. I likewise am afflicted with

two serious, if not complete incapacitating congenital diseases: To begin with, I suffer from incurable double vision, which causes me to see both sides of most issues. In addition, I am chronically ambidextrous: I always think in terms of "on the one hand--on the other hand." My analysis of the native-speaker issue will therefore be undertaken in my customary fence-sitting style, in what is known as a mug-wump position, with one's mug on one side and one's wump on the other.

A look at the titles of the three presentations at the MLA panel discussion immediately reveals the point that I am making: We are confronted with a plethora of question marks (two out of the three titles are formulated in the interrogative), and an unusually high frequency of quotation marks (again found in two of the three titles). This is characteristic for an issue for which there are more questions than answers and in which some of the major terms beg definition. Dr. Peters' presentation refers to so-called "native fluency," while my own addresses the so-called "native speaker" issue. These two terms plunge us headlong into the core of the controversy. Are they synonymous? I think not. Native fluency (or near-native fluency, a term preferred by the MLA Job Vacancy Lists, presumably for legal reasons) may be defined as possessing mastery of a given language equal--or almost equal--to that of a native speaker of the language. The term native speaker, on the other hand, refers to someone born into a linguistic environment. The distinction is apparently simple--but only apparently so. Closer analysis reveals that it is by no means as easy as all that to define the concept "native."

In the questionnaire which Dr. Peters sent out in February of 1979 and on which her analysis was based, she established a contrast between native speakers and American-born faculty members. The division is thus based on a distinction between people born in the United States and people born elsewhere. But even if we disregard

Puerto-Ricans, who are both American-born and native speakers of Spanish, there are other problems of definition. What about people born and raised in the United States in non-English-speaking communities? What is their "native" language? Some, like band-leader Lawrence Welk who was born in Wisconsin to a family of German immigrants and brought up in a German-speaking environment, maintain their foreign accent in English throughout their lives. On the other hand, there is the example--surely not an isolated one--of a Russian professor who was born in Shanghai, a child of White Russian emigrés, and spent her childhood in the Russian community. She is a native of China, but not a native speaker of Chinese. Yet, if we use the country of birth to define "native speaker," she is not a native speaker of Russian, either.

When we address the "native speaker" issue in the foreign language teaching profession, it might therefore be more advisable to set up a dichotomy between people whose mother tongue was English and those who were reared in a different linguistic environment. This would mean replacing the term "native language" by "first language," as against "second language" or "acquired language." (The phrase "foreign language" is in itself a loaded term and is best avoided.) But even with those definitions, do we not have to raise the question of how long a child was exposed to a particular language? To use a very specific but not unique illustration, let us take the case of an American professor of French who was born in Berlin but whose family, because of Hitler, emigrated to France when he was a small boy. Is he a native American? Of course not. Is he a native speaker of French? Of course not. Yet his "primary" language--in terms of proficiency rather than chronology--is French, even though it was an "acquired" language for him.

A similar--or even more difficult--problem arises with people who were brought up in bilingual families. Neither the term "native" language nor the concept of "first"

language is applicable here, although a dominant language develops in many cases. Do we have to coin terms like "father tongue" or "grandparent tongue" to parallel "mother tongue"?

These may be exceptions or infrequent instances, but they illustrate some of the conceptual problems we are confronted with. Yet even if there could be general agreement on what we mean by native speaker, we would still have to face up to the major issue: Can a case be made, in terms of a philosophy of language-teaching pedagogy, for the superiority of the native instructor? Is it educationally desirable--let alone legally permissible--for a language department to have a hiring policy which indicates a preference for having its courses taught by natives of the country in question? And if so, is such a preference equally desirable for all courses? Are native speakers "better" teachers for elementary or for advanced courses? Are native speakers more likely to use the target language exclusively as the instructional language? By no means. Does one have to be born in France to teach a seminar on 18th century French literature--in English? Is a native of Germany or Austria or Switzerland better qualified to teach German conversation? Or might such an instructor conceivably not have greater difficulty in keeping the conversation at the level of vocabulary and structure the students in this particular class have reached?

Beyond all these unanswerable questions, there is an even more vexing one: Are all native speakers born equal? Federal regulations currently prohibit discrimination against one regional accent in favor of another. A department may not, for example, reject a native of Cuba or Mexico as an applicant for a position to teach peninsular Spanish literature. But is it not both legal and appropriate to differentiate (or to discriminate in the old-fashioned, positive sense of the word) among various linguistic cultural levels? Do we not have the right to demand that faculty members in a

language department, whether their primary language be English or not, use the speech patterns of an "educated native" (however that term may be defined) in classroom instruction? That would appear to be a job-related educational requirement, in principle not unlike that of demanding a Ph.D. degree.

Nonetheless, in a situation similar to this issue, it was reported in the Higher Education Daily of September 17, 1980 that the Equal Employment Opportunity Commission in Washington ruled that a job requirement for study abroad was discriminatory and hence forbidden, unless it could be shown that such a requirement would not favor one nationality over another or could be justified as a "business necessity." In effect, EEOC attorney Raj Gupta was quoted as warning schools and colleges that "if you have such a rule, you should think twice about it."

In fact, the U.S. Department of Labor is currently investigating the University of California in Berkeley on just such a charge, according to Assistant Secretary Donald Elisberg. Allegedly Berkeley required foreign language instructors to have lived in a foreign country--not to have been born there, which would be patently illegal under current regulations, but just to have spent some unspecified length of time there.

It is not difficult to make a case for the need of language instructors to develop "native fluency," that is the ability to equal or at least to approximate native command of the language in question. Nor is it difficult to defend the proposition that one needs to spend some time in that particular linguistic environment--the so-called "total immersion" concept--in order to acquire such fluency. This is especially true if we recognize the fact that members of our profession are not only language teachers but teachers of culture as well--both in the aesthetic sense of that word as referring to the great artistic achievements of a people, and even more so in the anthropological sense of societal structure, the habits and patterns of daily life. These are extremely difficult if not outright impossible to

acquire through theoretical study alone, without a reasonably extensive direct exposure to the culture. In fact, another branch of the U.S. Government, and a very tough-minded one, the Internal Revenue Service, recognizes the necessity of a sojourn abroad for language teachers by allowing the cost of such travel as an income tax deduction. Surely, that in itself ought to be proof of the "business necessity" which the EEOC ruling requires.

But these may be peripheral issues. Let us return to the central question: Is it possible to make a case based on educational philosophy for giving hiring preference to a native speaker? Such a policy has usually been defended on the grounds that it is preferable for students to be exposed to the "genuine" accents of native speakers. But one might argue with equal validity that it would in fact be counter-productive to have a school or college language department staffed exclusively (or even predominantly) with native faculty members. Could such a situation not create in the minds of the students the almost inevitable conclusion that one has to be born in Russia to learn to speak Russian well, and that they therefore do not have a chance? Do students not need role models of professors who mastered the language even though they started out with the same disadvantage that our students suffer from, that of being native Americans? Indeed, some of our most inspiring language teachers are Americans who have acquired such fluency in their language that they are easily mistaken for native speakers.

Besides, native instructors (like myself) are frequently weighed down by another serious psychological handicap: our foreign accent in English, which may range from just a trace of Gallic charm à la Charles Boyer, a kind of exotic and attractive foreign flavor, to a heavy dose of Teutonic pronunciation and word order approaching the incomprehensible. This may not only make it difficult for

our students to follow the subleties of our arguments, but also gives rise to a legitimate complaint on their part: "He is after all a linguist, a language expert; he has lived in my country for umpteen years and has not yet mastered my language. Yet he expects me to be perfectly flawless in his language after only two years of three hours of German a week."

Beyond such at least partly justified student reactions to foreign-born language instructors, any policy of preference for native speakers is fundamentally demeaning to and indeed destructive of the very essence of our profession. The proud claim of Berlitz-type commercial language schools that all their instructors are natives of the country whose language they teach--without any mention of their academic qualifications, if any--is based on the underlying assumption that anyone who is born in Italy can teach Italian. This is the "native informant" philosophy which has largely been responsible for undermining our professional image, as if language teaching did not require academic preparation as thorough, as extensive, and as rigorous as that of any other profession.

But more than that, what justification do we have for the existence of our graduate programs if the products of our training are automatically, inevitably, and by definition inferior to people who were born and raised abroad? How can we continue to produce Ph.D.'s if by our own hiring practices we have condemned our own students to second-class status?

As a matter of fact, the linguistic training for the teaching qualifications of a native speaker is (or should be) even more rigorous than that needed for the acquisition of a second language. It requires a conscious analysis of unconscious linguistic patterns, the ability of knowing not only what is right but why it is right, an awareness of the particular structural principle involved. If a student asks "Why is this wrong?" it is never enough to say "Because it doesn't sound right" or--even worse--"Because I say so."

Recent studies in error analysis, such as the ones by Helga DeLisle and Robert Politzer, have revealed significant judgmental differences between native and non-native speakers regarding the hierarchical evaluation of the seriousness of certain errors, i.e. the danger of a given mistake producing communication failure. While there is broad overall agreement about the problems created by lexical errors, as a general rule non-native ~~teachers~~ speakers (at least in the case of German) tend to consider morphological mistakes as more serious, while native speakers by and large give greater emphasis to pronunciation and syntax. But this is precisely where the biggest teaching problems arise, since these areas constitute what might be called "deep grammar," i.e. rules absorbed by the native speaker instictively rather than cognitively. Thus, many educated Germans are totally unaware of the fact that they habitually produce two different "ch" sounds in words like ich and Buch, just as most educated speakers of English do not consciously know the difference between the voiced and the unvoiced "th" sounds, such as the minimal pair contrast between either and ether.

Similarly, word order in one's mother tongue is taken for granted. We are never taught principles of word order, yet even the most uneducated person never makes a mistake in it. Syntax is a structural pattern which we ~~absorb~~ learn subconsciously. Thus, for example, the sequence of adverbial modifiers in the sentence "He came home drunk yesterday" is rigidly frozen once we begin with the subject. No other sequence is possible. "He came drunk yesterday home" ~~simply~~ just does not work. Our brain ~~just~~ simply is not programmed to accept this syntatic arrangement and sends back signals saying "This sequence does not compute." Even highly educated speakers of English, however, would not know why. Yet this is precisely the sequence German uses: "Er kam gestern betrunken nach Hause." The English pattern, "Er kam nach Hause betrunken gestern," would not work in German.

Native German speakers use the right sequence automatically, although they would not normally know why they are doing so. Foreigners learning German, on the other hand, are taught the underlying principle: German adverbial modifiers generally follow the sequence of time, manner, and place. (The rule is actually more complex, but this simple statement, which is what most students learn, will suffice here.)

A strong argument could thus be made for giving preference to American-born over foreign-born language instructors, based on the claim that they have greater empathy with and understanding for the problems faced by American students. One might envision of a sort of import quota for language instructors from abroad to protect the home-grown product, similar to the autpmobile industry.
But aside from the fact that this would be just as illegal as discrimination in favor of native speakers, there are some undeniable advantages to having some native speakers in a language department, some "resident experts," as it were. There are subleties of language, allusions, connotations, emotional associations, literary and proverbial references, puns, colloquialisms, slang expressions, which are extremely difficult to acquire and even more difficult to keep up with. After almost forty years in the United States, my own English is still not as flawless as I would like it to be. The fact is that there are very few truly bilingual speakers. While most of us have a dominant language, we tend to lose our fluency in one language as we gain it in another, in spite of even the most conscientious efforts to keep them both equally alive and well. Thus, while I may never reach native fluency in English, I fight a continuous battle against losing native fluency in German. The phenomenon of a mixed language, or "Emigranto," as it is sometimes called, is all too common. We end up speaking between two languages, which is as unsatisfactory as sitting between two chairs.

It is my conviction, however, that most people in the foreign language teaching profession are aware of the questions this presentation has raised, even though they may not have verbalized them. Is the native speaker issue a genuine problem resulting in a wide-spread, systematic, and deliberate policy of discrimination? Probably not. Is it a pretext for occasional discriminatory practice, perhaps especially in the case of women candidates? Probably yes, as suggested by available evidence. The best solution would seem to lie in establishing a kind of self-monitoring policy of seeking a balance between foreign natives and American-born faculty members in language departments, with the understanding that in the filling of an individual vacancy the only justified criteria are standards of excellence. To our traditional insistence on evidence of scholarly achievements and high level of teaching competence, we must add a requirement for fluency in the language and rigorous training in its linguistic structure. Such a requirement would have to apply equally to American and foreign-born candidates. And our best hope for achieving such a policy lies in doing precisely what the Modern Language Association has done in organizing a session on the topic and what the Association of Departments of Foreign Languages is doing in publishing this essay: a thorough airing of the issue.

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